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ABSTRACT

The disparity between advanced educational preparation and training and subsequent employment opportunities raises major questions regarding traditional academic expectations and lifestyles. This article offers some suggestions for a new relationship between educational institutions and scientists, writers, artists, and other highly-specialized creative individuals. (Author)

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Higher Education: From Occupation to Way of Life

The disparity between advanced educational preparation and training and subsequent employment opportunities raises major questions regarding traditional academic expectations and lifestyles. In this article, Loring M. Thompson, vice president for planning at Northeastern University, offers some suggestions for a new relationship between educational institutions and scientists, writers, artists, and other highly-specialized creative individuals.

A Ph.D. candidate recently requested that the date for his orals be changed. When pressed for the reason, he explained that he was coming up for his master plumber rating, and that date chould not be changed.

A few individuals like this one will depart from the mainstream of expected behavior and start new eddies which may be harbingers of the future. Creative work in a highly specialized scientific field is of great personal interest, but realism about employment opportunities also dictates preparation in a traditional skill. Which activity will become vocational and which will become avocational depends upon job openings which are difficult to forecast for highly specialized fields.

Maladjustments between Enrollments and Employment Opportunities

In this century, there has been tremendous growth of higher education in America. This growth has been related primarily to specialized occupational or professional fields, from law and medicine to agriculture, education, engineering, business, and the sciences. In contrast, general education has become an object of neglect, pushed aside by various academic disciplines.

The current emphasis upon specialization and occupational fields is fraught with unsolved problems. There is often little relationship between the fields students want to study and the employment opportunities in these fields. In the interest of economy of resources and student and faculty time, these maladjustments are bemoaned and some efforts made to approach a balance. Many philosophic, economic, and logistical factors are involved in the problem, and attempted adjustment procedures vary from field to field.

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For higher education as a whole, the current national effort is to increase its accessibility for high school graduates, with little concern about employment opportunities at a level appropriate for college-trained persons. (A recent study by the National Board on Graduate Education urged that students should continue to have a free choice, despite an oversupply of Ph.D.'s in some specialized fields, arguing that sufficient information on the manpower market would enable students to act in their own best interests.)

Within higher education, the policies on free choice for students differ markedly from one field to another. In business administration, for example, there has been an expansion of course offerings and programs, both day and evening, to match increases in student demand. In law and medicine, on the other hand, student demand has not been treated with the same respect. In these fields, the total enrollment increase has been far smaller than the number of qualified applicants, and the Federal Government is now indicating a tapering off of medical school support, based upon projected requirements for physicians.

In science and engineering there have been fluctuations and reversals. Shortly after World War II, a bulletin from the Bureau of Labor Statistics warned prospective students that an oversupply of engineers was in the offing, but with the advent of the Korean War, the Bureau hastily reversed its position. After Sputnik, national policy soon emphasized science at all levels of education, expanding facilities and student enrollment, and promoting research. The response of young people was to flock into sociology and psychology. Now even some of those who did pursue science and engineering

are disillusioned with employment opportunities. So there is underutilization of new physical science laboratories while large numbers of students are frustrated because they are denied admission to schools of medicine and law.

In summary, experience provides scant hope of easily adjusting what young people want to study to employment opportunities and to our needs for specialized, professional manpower. In the past, much student motivation to go to college has been based upon personal economic benefits, a better paying job – but now many college graduates may have to accept employment below the level of competence for which they have been trained.

Higher Education as a Way of Life

The very success of higher education as an avenue to personal economic advancement may now be turning into a disadvantage. Motivated largely by economic considerations, we have allowed the general benefits of education to be forgotten in our enthusiasm for enrollment expansion. Enrollments have risen to a point where they cannot be sustained. Without a broader perspective of the values of education, higher education can become a house of cards built on sand.

A fundamental assumption of higher education is the importance of abstract thinking in the life of every human being. Rational analysis and creative endeavors are among the highest of virtues. Participation in the arts, sciences, humanities, and erudite professions is a value in itself for the individual and for the larger society. Another value long associated with academia is that of independent thinking and democracy, with evaluation and criticism by qualified peers, but with no control by peers or by society. These values of higher education as a way of life are independent of any specific economic justifications and career applications.

Consistent with these values is the current social goal of making higher education accessible to all persons who are interested and qualified, irrespective of their economic status. But this goal does not guarantee employment immediately after graduation in a high-paying specialized position. The national economy cannot adapt itself to provide these positions as successive classes graduate. To justify going to college solely on immediate economic gains for the individual would limit college enrollments to forecasts of job opportunities considered appropriate for college graduates.

The basic values of higher education are independent of such motivations and constraints. While colleges and universities have allowed themselves to become dependent upon immediate economic justifications in the past, their future will be far brighter in the long run if they give greater emphasis to the basic values of higher education.

A Bright Future for Avocations

Modern economic affluence is now making scholarly endeavors possible as a way of life open to all who are interested. Shorter working days and a shorter working week provide substantial units of time which can be devoted to many different kinds of leisure or to scholarly or artistic activity. A person's vocation need not necessarily be the major concern and interest in his or her life. One's social status and way of life need not be inextricably linked to passing vocational activity.

Competition for recognition and financial rewards can become very intense, so intense that encouragement of creativity should come from its own intrinsic value. The limit to the speed with which even well-planned changes can be absorbed in any society limits the financial inducements which a society will offer.

People now have the freedom to select important, major interests and devote much of their lives to these interests, regardless of employment opportunities. In fact, to pursue a creative or artistic interest as a vocation may be more frustrating than to pursue it with the freedom of an avocation, because employees must be responsible for conformance with market demands, corporate policies, and burdensome administrative details.

The term "avocational academician" is used to identify this concept. Future college students may be motivated to be professional or avocational academicians. They will study the subject matter of greatest interest to them. If the employment market offers attractive opportunities, they may earn their living in that field; they are prepared to earn their bread at another occupation if necessary, and to continue to devote their creative interests to their chosen field.

In other words, these people will be selecting an academic way of life: a life involving abstract thinking, intellectual analysis, perceptivity, and creativity. The fact that they may not be paid for doing this will not deter them. The achievements of avocational academicians in the past portend a bright future for this living pattern in an affluent society.

Historical Examples of Avocational Academicians

Although not identified by this term, many avocational academicians have existed in the past and made major contributions to the arts and sciences. Albert Einstein was employed for several years in the patent office in Switzerland, but found time to contemplate fundamental problems of physics. Henry David Thoreau supported himself as a surveyor and by working in the family pencil factory. Further back in history, the English essayist, Charles Lamb, was a lifelong clerk employed by the East India House, yet he developed personal friendships with prominent literary figures of his day.

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Four of "The Five" composers who resisted the conservative establishment and created a National Russian School of Music began their music as an avocation. Borodin had some fame as a chemist. Cui was initially an authority on military fortifications. Rimsky-Korskov wrote his First Symphony while on a three-year cruise as a naval officer. Mussorgsky was first in the army and then had a civil service post. Only Balakirev was a full-time career musician in his early life, and subsequently even he took a post as a railway clerk when his musical fortunes ebbed. In American music, one of the most original and prophetic of composers, Charles Ives, supported himself with an insurance firm which bore his name as one of the partners. Even these few examples suggest that whenever the scholarly and artistic establishment becomes a bit rigid, it is the function of avocational academicians to pioneer in the direction of freedom and creativity.

University Sponsorship of Avocational Academicians

Continuous university encouragement, sponsorship, and support will facilitate the development of many more avocational academicians in the future. For this purpose, a number of different but feasible and reasonable adjustments will be necessary within schools and colleges.

- **Bifurcation of Educational Programs** It should be possible for students to pursue vocational objectives at the same time that they are involved in the serious study of erudite subject matter. Within a liberal education, there should be room for a very practical component, and some limited college credit might be allowed for this vocational component. In any event, the scheduling of classes and study assignments should recognize and encourage student involvement in both scholarly and practical subjects. This policy should extend to high school students.

- **Continuing Education for Evolving Interests** When people include both vocational and scholarly pursuits in their living pattern, there will often be intermittent shifts in emphasis. Students' motivations and interests change as they mature and experience the unexpected adventures of life. For many young people, the establishment of a vocation is of prime initial importance; attention may later be devoted to new interests.

The patterns which have been developed by programs of adult and continuing education are appropriate and deserving of emulation. Courses are offered at times and places convenient for part-time students. The current "university without walls" concept is a variation on this approach.

Primarily to serve part-time graduate students in science and engineering, Northeastern University opened a Suburban Campus in 1964. This action was taken after repeated proddings from the research-oriented industries in the Route 128-area of Greater Boston, who found that their employees resisted attending the Boston Campus because of traffic and parking problems.

With the suburban facility available for day time use also, the university scheduled courses for the convenience of housewives using the designation "Special Programs for Women." So many men of all ages also came that the designation had to be changed to "Adult Day Programs." The content of the offerings serves a variety of interests – avocational and life enrichment, new careers, and advancement within existing careers.

- **Acceptance of Part-Time Study** Eventually, higher education will become oriented more to serving the part-time, continuing students than to serving full-time students who recently finished high school. Today several practices help perpetuate the myth of the full-time student: flat tuition fees on the assumption of full-time study; student activities and housing primarily or exclusively for full-time students; and tax exemptions for parents of full-time students. In addition, many graduate students are classified as full-time, although they actually give much time to employment at the institution where they are also enrolled.

The life styles of many students indicate that they find scholarship more palpable as a part-time activity. A great many so-called full-time students are also wage earners, and it is becoming increasingly popular to drop out of college and then back in. Some professors much prefer that students have practical experience as a realistic background for further study.

In medicine, law, and theology, part-time students are harder to find because policies specify that students must be full-time. To open up these fields to all qualified applicants, full-time or part-time, young or old, would be a tremendous step toward equalization of educational opportunities and free choice of fields of study for all interested persons.

- **Accessibility of Facilities** A most needed support for avocational academic activities is the provision of accessible facilities. A requirement in all fields of study is a research library. Most public libraries do not attempt to serve the advanced scholar, and large universities find it burdensome to extend library privileges to faculty from nearby smaller institutions. Ideally, each region of the country should have a research library which is prepared to serve all persons with scholarly interests.

The nature of other needed facilities will vary greatly from field to field. A sculptor may need the occasional use of a high-temperature kiln and an astronomer a chance to have certain experimental observations made on a large telescope. For much of the work in chemistry, access to laboratory space is essential; the author recalls one instance where a professional chemist took over a large family business but arranged to have a laboratory station assigned to him at a local university.

The legitimacy of public funds for university facilities of all kinds has been well established in this country. The tradition of support for public libraries also has a long history. By merging these two traditions, we can provide public funding for regional facilities. In this way, publically supported research libraries, computer cen-

ters, laboratories, studios, and arts centers can be available to all qualified persons.

- **Standards and Recognition** For creative persons, there is need for freedom from conventional restraints, yet a desire for recognition as well. Certainly the university would alienate creative efforts if it attempted to force all scholars and artists to constantly measure themselves against adult-level tests, grades, and standards. At the same time, standards will provide many persons with a focus and specific objective for their efforts.

The Music Department at Northeastern University now offers academic credit to participants in certain community orchestras who meet defined standards of performance. According to the plan, the conductors of these orchestras must be competent to evaluate performance and qualify as part-time faculty members. The musicians working for the academic credit are already avocational academicians. They do not aspire to earn their living in the already crowded field of professional music. They do intend to become competent in music and to make it a major part of their lives. The University is offering them specific standards of achievement on a voluntary basis.

- **Participation as Respected Partners** For the professional scholar or scientist, daily work activities provide opportunities for stimulating interaction with colleagues. For the person pursuing a subject as an avocation, there is greater need for contacts with a university. Advanced seminars and workshop can enable avocational academicians to be accepted as important contributors to the ongoing thinking within the university. Alumni meetings can also become a means of continuous communication with university faculty as part of an academic way of life. For the oustanding avocational academic an, the avenue should be open for an appointment as an adjunct professor or even a full-time professor.

Benefits for Higher Education and the Nation

Higher Education would reap many benefits from creating a setting to encourage students to become avocational academicians.

- **Alignment with Basic Values** In the heritage of America, education is given an intrinsic value which is not subordinate to immediate employment opportunities in the market place. If higher education is prepared to sponsor avocational academic activities of its graduates, then it can encourage students to pursue these interests because of their intrinsic worth.

- **Political Support** For continued political support, higher education needs a large clientele of persons who feel it to be an important part of their lives. Support can hardly be expected from persons denied admission, from graduates frustrated by unrealistic employment expectations, or from working people who see professional schools as arbitrarily restricting entry to high-paying and high-status employment. Support can be expected from persons who are welcomed to a continuing relationship with the campus as avocational academicians.

- **A Reserve for Evolving National Manpower Requirements** With respect to changing national needs, nothing could be more valuable than a reserve of competent amateurs who could easily change their avocation into a profession. For example, if in 1978 more bio-chemists graduate than the market is able to absorb, those who become avocational bio-chemists will be able to serve the nation in this field when the need for them increases ten years later.

The current energy crisis makes it more difficult to determine just what scientific specialties will be needed until large new efforts directed a particular sources of energy are organized and funded. Certainly in this situation it is good national policy to encourage avocational scientific activities by persons in a wide variety of specialized fields.

- **Freedom and Fulfillment for students** With a new horizon for avocational interests opening up, students may now have much greater freedom to study what they want to study, be it art, science, theology, or music. The number of first violins in the Boston Symphony Orchestra is limited, but the number of people who can devote meaningful lives to music is unlimited. In the future, the arts, sciences, and erudite professions may be selected by students because of their intrinsic worth and value. As fields of study are no longer rejected because of limitations in the market place, personal fulfillment will become more and more a matter of free choice.

– Loring M. Thompson

Editor's note: The author may be overoptimistic as he views the present circumstances in which highly trained individuals can no longer look forward to full-time employment in their field of specialization. The opportunities of a leisure society are seen from another perspective by a fired tenured professor, or by a lecturer or adjunct instructor at a university which is hiring no new high-salaried professors. (Similarly, highly trained older engineers are now being laid off by corporations which then hire young M.S. graduates to do the same work for lower salaries.) For some, part-time blue collar or menial white collar employment has emerged as a tempting and often necessary alternative to the insecurities and instabilities of highly competitive free-lance or long-term work in creative or academic areas. Of course, many others have welcomed their opportunity to make such a choice. What is indisputable is that the existence of a life-long alternation between vocational and avocational practice in specialized fields, for both individual and socio-economic reasons, seems destined to become a permanent factor in planning for education and employment.

– Lawrence F. Kramer